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# The practice of solidarity through the arts: inter-relations and shared moments of creation in *Share My Table*

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*In 2017 the Scottish Refugee Council and Tramway embarked on a collaborative participatory arts project seeking to explore the upsurge in media coverage around issues of migration. Share My Table took a multi-artform approach, with performance and visual art providing the foundation for the exploration. This article, written from the position of artist researcher, shifts the lens away from the artistic or performance outputs of this participatory project, and instead reflects and theorises the working practices which emerged throughout the Share My Table project. By drawing on bell hooks's work on practices of freedom (1994), and James Thompson's call for a re-focusing towards affect, beauty and care (2011, 2015), the author argues for participatory practice's radical potential. Ultimately, the how of participatory work, the careful and ethical attention on the doing can activate solidarity in relation to the asylum regime.*

I see a family standing in a queue

I see an administrator

I see suffering and fear

I see some people are happy

I see talk of danger

I see stop

I see someone waiting and the traffic light is green

I see praying

I see someone working

I see a family

I see a student

I see

Stop

Extract from collaborative performance poem created by  
*Share My Table* project members



*What Do You See?: our large-scale intervention invited audiences to look beyond media headlines and images to consider who is the author, who is the subject, and why?*  
Photo: Najma Abukar.

## Introduction and critical context

In February 2017, the Scottish Refugee Council and Tramway opened the doors to the first gathering of their latest partnership:

We invite you to join *Share My Table*—a diverse group of people living in Glasgow

looking to creatively respond to the recent media attention surrounding migration. This multi-artform project brings together people, food and conversation (Scottish Refugee Council, 2017).

The open, public workshop had been advertised widely across the city in multiple languages; amongst integration networks, through community and support organisations, as well as in person by the project coordinator Deborah May at English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, libraries and drop-in centres. The project led by myself (a theatre-maker) and visual artist Elena Mary Harris, was defined as an arts and integration project, and in conversation with the project producers our hope was to gather people from across generations, cultures and countries. In order to encourage a ‘two-way process’ of integration (Scottish Government, 2013, p.2) the supporting strapline for the invitation read: ‘Whether you have been in Glasgow your whole life or for just a week we would love you to be part of this’ (*Share My Table* recruitment flyer, 2017).

Positioned as artist researcher, I balanced two roles throughout the *Share My Table* project. One as co-lead theatre artist with a brief and a team of partners, whose job it was to develop the project collaboratively with all those involved. The second as an arts-based researcher, whose participation in the project—and ongoing engagement in ‘participatory dialogue’ or ‘a *correspondence*’ (Ingold, 2011, p.241) with everyone involved—would be fundamental to how I was going to examine the relationship between participatory arts practice in Glasgow and the processes of integration undertaken by individuals seeking asylum and those granted refugee status. It would be in the *doing* of this project, and in the act of ‘thinking, talking and writing in and with the world’ (p.241) that I would develop the direction of my study. My research and my artmaking processes continually interacted, operating on what can best be described as a feedback loop; reflecting back upon each other through a ‘hermeneutic-interpretive

spiral' (Trimingham, 2002, p.56). I draw attention to my positioning as artist researcher by writing in what James Thompson defines an 'affective register', one that is 'both practice-based and analytical' (2011, p.7).

My artistic and scholarly work on *Share My Table* approaches with caution the trend for the arts to be 'reshaped within a political logic' (Bishop, 2012, p.13). New Labour, for example, instrumentalised the arts for the goal of social inclusion or cohesion (p.13), and this has given way to the dominating ideological view that participatory arts' sole societal role is to produce quantifiable effects (Thompson, 2011, p.116). Alongside this, contemporary cultural policies are quick to employ what Simone Weil, and in turn Alison Phipps, would term 'empty words' (Weil, 2005, cited in Phipps, 2014, p.110). Words like empowerment, resilience, agency and social change are 'given capital letters' (p.110) as part of a project or organisational agenda, whilst being simultaneously 'emptied of content and manipulated for absolute ends' (p.111), without rigorous consideration of 'what they can conceal, the justice they may divert and illusion of "good" they may foster' (p.111). Like critical theory, the arts are 'not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary' (hooks, 1994, p.61). They are as much a bedfellow of global capitalism and the violent structures embedded within it, as they are allied in solidarity with those most damaged and marginalised by it (Jelinek, 2013). Particularly in the field of refugee performance, stories risk being extracted, re-contextualised or presented in ways that over-simplify or misrepresent individual experience and complexity (Jeffers, 2012). Work too often tends towards an 'aesthetic of injury' (Salverson, 1999, p.34), a trend in migration discourse more broadly that Ida Danewid argues is leading to an 'erasure of history' and of political responsibility, because

[i]n the context of the European migrant crisis, such a framing has led to an ethics based on mourning and welcoming migrants as universal humans—rather than as victims of a shared,

global present built on colonialism, racism, and white supremacy (Danewid, 2017, p.1683).

Equally, this research is framed by an engagement with the critical discourse that circulates around the concept of integration. Critics like Melinda McPherson argue that 'integrationism is commonly represented as the middle ground of migration policy'; a compromise between multiculturalism and assimilation seen to appease critics of these two 'extremes' (2010, p. 551). But the reality, Sara Ahmed contends, is that integrating is about homogenising:

[a]lthough integration is not defined as 'leaving your culture behind' (at least not officially), it is unevenly distributed, as a demand that new or would-be citizens embrace a common culture that is already given (Ahmed, 2010, p.47).

Ellie Vasta goes further arguing that the European shift towards integration discourse indicates a 'desire to control difference' (2010, p.505), with ever-hardening conditions that define what an ideal citizen is, to the inevitable exclusion of many. Furthermore, with a large percentage of individuals seeking asylum being integrated into poverty, amidst a high surveillance culture increasingly suspicious of outsiders, and the ever-present risk of indefinite detention, I carry forward the concern held by many scholars working around integration, about what kind of society individuals and families trying to settle in the UK are being expected to integrate into (Mulvey, 2013, p.134).

In this article, I examine the working methods which emerged throughout *Share My Table* by drawing on bell hooks's work on the practices of freedom. Paying particular attention to the importance of dialogue and collaboration as a foundation of engaged pedagogy, I apply her theory of education on to the *how* of my own

artistic practice: in order for *artistic practice* to fulfil a political or liberatory function, we must 'ask that it do so' (1994, p.61). I will also respond to Thompson's call for participatory practice to 'recognise affect-bodily responses, sensations and aesthetic pleasures' as 'a place from which a particular politics of practice can be developed' (2011, p.7). Thus, I seek to shift the lens away from the artistic and public outputs of *Share My Table* and towards its process, encounters, interactions and workshop dynamics. I question what it might mean that for many project members, *Share My Table* made them feel 'as though I am in my family home' (Flower)<sup>1</sup>, or that they were 'not in this world alone' (Joe). I am not attempting to position the project as a blueprint of best practice, or as having constructed some sort of ideal process for other practitioners to model their projects on. Rather, I hope to 'exercise a little critical vigilance' (Phipps, 2014, p.110) in order to shed some light on the practical, ethical and social tensions of *Share My Table*, and to interrogate what the potential *politics* of arts and integration might be. I suggest that through an attentiveness to the aesthetic practices in the room, we constructed, even if temporarily, a space of care and solidarity. One that invoked a feeling of being 'really free' (Maham).

## **The politics of the space in action**

*Share My Table's* weekly workshops were held in the Studio space of Tramway in the Southside of Glasgow. With large white walls, a high ceiling full of bright windows and a dance-floor at its centre, the room felt quite different from the many community spaces or charity offices that arts projects are often squeezed into. Before the first session Elena and I were concerned that the Studio might be intimidating to walk into, its scale and openness make you visible to all others, wherever you are in the space. There were no obvious shadowy corners for those less sure about their involvement to tuck themselves away. In many ways, this was a gift, but we wondered whether it might put project members off. To counter this, one of the earliest decisions made was to ensure that the space always felt active by creating a

physical and symbolic structure to the room. The artistic team divided up the space by using chairs and soft benches, into four different areas:

- a working / focused space
- an active observer space
- a break-out / food space
- and outside of the room

We quickly learnt that not only did these sub-spaces allow the room to feel busier to the eye on first arrival, it also helped us establish a set of spatial parameters that allowed project members to access the work at their own pace, with the assurance that they were always part of the working dynamic of the whole Studio. Even though each session started with a shared meal, some individuals would be keen to be active in the working space from the moment they arrived, whilst others would choose to watch from the periphery for almost the entire session. To borrow from Adrian Howells' artistic philosophy, delineating the space enabled us to gently suggest that 'it's all allowed' (Heddon and Johnson, 2016, p.14), an ethos that played out in a multitude of ways as the project developed. Rather than creating rules for the room that felt restrictive, these spatial dynamics created a structured flexibility that invited people to move through the space with ease, testing out the artistic activities and defining the terms of their own engagement. Through this the Studio became a site for enacting one of the central tenets of hooks's theories on practices of freedom, that each individual in the room 'assume responsibility for their choices' (1994, p.19).

My journal notes reveal that this spatial structure did not always feel successful; with up to forty people in workshops, at times I felt some sessions had descended into chaos: 'I worry we are just managing space, rather than holding or facilitating creativity' (Evans, 2017). However, despite—or perhaps in spite of—the anarchic atmosphere that often permeated across our four sub-



spaces, we committed to this set-up because we began to understand that spatially we were gesturing towards a politics of *freedom of movement* in the room. Many project members articulated that the space felt quite unique in comparison to other spaces they spent time in, and when invited to engage critically with why this was Alee identified a sense of engaged autonomy:

you can come and you know  
you are doing something  
you are not coming to listen to someone  
or for any information or anything  
you are doing something  
you are participating in some work  
and its very peaceful  
nobody  
interrupt you  
nobody point at you  
nobody ask you questions  
nobody deal with you like you are school children  
like  
sit down  
here

What I want to draw out of Alee's observation is the importance she places on the absence of feeling like a passive observer being controlled or instructed. With no one saying 'sit / down / here' she suggests that the Studio space was asserting its own performative function; working as a symbolic and material counterpoint to the

physically restrictive and oppressive spaces of the immigration asylum system, made manifest in the macro and micro-borders, check-points, and regular sign-ins that Alee, and the majority of *Share My Table's* project members were compelled to spend a disproportionate amount of time in. The Studio space became, in its own unspoken way, part of an ongoing pedagogy of resistance that was emerging within the practices of the project; 'a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist' (hooks, 1994, p.2) the everyday oppressive strategies imposed by the British state that dictate the terms of where you are allowed to go, and when you are allowed to participate.

## The affect of purpose



*Our Share My Table map: this ongoing exercise saw us chart the journeys we took in order to come together each week, and prompted us to share our experiences of the city.*  
Photo: Elena Mary Harris.

With each weekly session Elena and I were eager for project members to walk into a space that would *feel* like an artistic space. Creative debris and evidence of previous arts workshops splattered on the walls helped mark the artistic activity, but we complimented this within each session by ensuring that something was always already *happening* as people arrived. Whether this was adding to our large collective map, helping organise materials for the session, or gathering round and feeding into the day's discussion topics, we aimed for there to be a palpable sense of *doing* that individuals could engage with from the outset of each workshop. This speaks directly to hooks's contention that a teacher or facilitator in a space needs to enact an engaged practice—not simply to try and generate it. By embracing 'the performative aspect' of our role, to perform our busyness, we were 'compelled to engage "audiences," to consider issues of reciprocity' (1994, p.11) that challenged us, as the artistic leads, to embody the ways of working we wanted to inspire within the room. In turn, we found that this approach engendered a sense of purpose across the space, a purposefulness that was infectious, permeating into how the workshop itself played out, and thus serving 'as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants' (p.11) in the creation of the work, as well as the working practices of the space itself.

In the reflective research sessions I facilitated alongside *Share My Table* many of the project members drew my attention to a sense of purpose within our activities as a reason they kept returning each week. Lawyer talked about this sense of purpose in relation to a specific workshop where he had entered the space to see and feel a hive of activity that pulled him in. He reflected on the experience as one that had made him feel fully *alive*—something he had not felt very often since leaving his home country. The workshop had focused on creating large sculptures made of newspaper throughout the Tramway building, sculptures that deliberately interrupted or disrupted the space. To prepare everyone for this activity, we started the session with a collective task of creating a giant newspaper sculpture that

spanned the diagonal length of the Studio. My own notes reflect the way the group responded:

There was a moment of pause before everyone jumped in—no questions, no resistance, just action with everyone selecting paper and beginning to build. I thought we might just all end up working on our own sections—and for a while this was the case, but very soon groups of activity had emerged—working to best prop up a structure or solving how to connect two seemingly disconnected sections. There was folding, rolling, crunching, scrunching, laughter and the sound of sellotape being pulled and ripped, and as we worked more people arrived and they became absorbed into the activity, no questions asked they just got to work, keen to be part of this shared piece of work... My favourite moment was re-entering the space after having left for a moment, because I hadn't quite realised how many folk had arrived. The room was full, with people making—one person up on a chair hanging something, others gathered around one of the structures working out how best to keep it upright, others deep in construction mode. There was conversation but nothing was distracting from this moment, everyone was making this happen. It was beautiful (Evans, 2017).

The spirit of activity that gripped people as they entered the space operated as an embodiment of collective endeavour, and the beauty that I felt and was moved by in this moment propelled me further to reflect on Thompson's call for an '*attention to affect*' in participatory practice (2011, p.117). With reference to Patricia Ticineto Clough (2007) Thompson contends that affect

is connected both to a capacity for action and to a sense of aliveness, where it is that vitality that prompts a person's desire to connect and engage (perhaps with others or ideas). It is not a field of particular communicative content, therefore, but rather of capacity and intensity (Thompson, 2011, p.119).

The vitality that I witnessed was emotionally understood as that of being alive for Lawyer. For me, it articulated itself as 'beauty', and whilst the colonial ramifications around definitions of beauty are extensive and require a vigilant critical tangent elsewhere<sup>2</sup>, here I emphasise this encounter in order to demonstrate that 'the work' of participatory arts practice 'cannot be distilled to messages, story content or words, but must be opened up to the sustenance of sensation' (p.125); sensation that is relational, for it was the inter-relation between person and person, between people and their materials, and the care that was being taken to make the artwork *together* that affected me. Here, beauty was embedded within what Thompson calls 'the aesthetics of care' (2015, p.436), a process underpinned by the forging of 'inter-human relationships' (p.438) between project members. As Odeion expressed in his reflective session:

they keep everyone connected with the other

through what we did

what we made

for example

I am Algerian

my friend here

who is part of my family now

is Eritrean

we didn't speak the same language

and we can't communicate with each other  
but with the arts and workshops  
the activities we used to do  
we start to communicate with each other  
even  
just give me this  
give me that  
what is this  
what is that  
what's the idea  
we start to understand each other  
even different nationalities  
different language  
so its through the work  
through doing the activities  
the workshops  
that is what connects us

These affective moments to me express what Thompson calls 'beautiful attentiveness' (2011, p.119) by creating hopeful ways of being together, moments 'to make visible a better world' (p.2). Indeed, Odeion's reflections prompt me to stress, with reference to Thompson, that participatory workshop spaces should not be considered as rehearsals for real-life, but real-life sites in and of themselves. Thus, I argue that through the purposeful acts of creative construction *Share My Table* worked to counter normative or even aggressive hegemonic tendencies by developing alternative ways of relating to

one another, by 'stimulat[ing] affective solidarity between people' (Thompson, 2015, p.437).

### **Visibility, Multiplicity and Responsibility**

Throughout *Share My Table* our artistic approach, in many ways, was an attempt to embed a radical pedagogy rooted in 'an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes' (hooks, 1994, p.8). My artistic impetus was to create an environment where each individual's contributions were viewed as resources that could constructively enhance the capacity and creativity of the space we were building together (p.8). As project member Precise articulated it,

whether you can speak English  
whether you cannot speak English  
you want everybody to do something  
that was very very good  
there are other places you go to  
they don't want to know  
even if you sit there 24 hours  
watching  
everything going on  
no one will come to you and say  
what is your opinion  
how do you see this  
or what do you think we should do  
I think  
its a kind of like

segregation

like

fine

your presence is welcome

but

we don't care about your opinion

and things like that

share my table wasn't like that at all

everybody had something to do

everybody was involved

One method Elena and I called upon to engender this engaged pedagogy was to develop a ritual for entering the creative sub-space as the workshop started proper. The ritual was to use a 'check-in', which saw the group gather in a circle and one by one share how they were feeling that day. Individuals were encouraged to experiment with their methods of communication—using English, using another language they were comfortable in, or using their bodies. Although often light-hearted, at moments the circle carried a profundity as people shared news of family reunification, loss of life and asylum process stress. These check-ins were supported by warm-up exercises, that included work with the breath, physical movement and group interaction, all focused on creating space and time for each person to articulate themselves, even if all they wanted to say was 'hello'. Through our check-ins, the Studio established itself as a space that 'genuinely *valu[ed]* everyone's presence' (hooks, 1994, p.8).

Building on this commitment to valuing visibility for each person in the room, Elena and I built in time for creative sharings and moments of performance within each



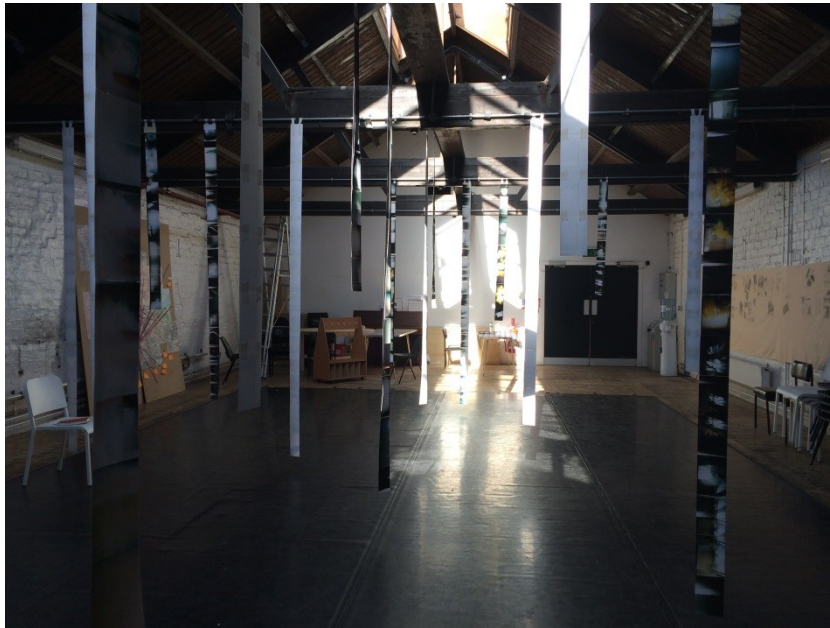
workshop. In her discussion on being part of a transformative pedagogy in multicultural spaces, hooks follows Paulo Friere in foregrounding the importance of building community, 'in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigour' (hooks, 1994, p.40). One way to do this 'is to recognize the value of each individual voice' (p.40) by sharing work with one another. It is the act of hearing a multiplicity of voices and listening deeply to one another—an act hooks terms as an 'exercise in recognition'—that each individual in the room is invited to 'make their presence known' (p.41). *Share My Table* embraced this approach and expanded upon this theory to consider not just the voice but the body as a source for making one's presence known.

We had a moment of all bodies moving together, of interweaving and negotiating themselves through the space. Then we asked them to do it one at a time—to keep the space alive—and to focus on each other. We managed to do this in silence, we started by all breathing together and then one by one they moved... There was a sense of risk taking—moving through any space can be difficult, but being actively witnessed is even harder. I felt I was watching Flower actually physically grow as she crossed the space—slowly taking pleasure in being witnessed. The group were holding the space for one another, they worked together and an atmosphere of mutual respect was palpable. It finished with an applause (Evans, 2017).

Whether we were reading or showing a piece of writing, exhibiting an art-work in one of our pop-up exhibitions, or expressing our emotional or intellectual ideas through tableaux, these intimate and fleeting sharings took on a multiplicity of meanings. They became a practice in and of themselves of *inviting visibility*—of normalising the

process of being seen and heard as one's self. This process ran counter to the constant practices of categorisation (Crawley and Skleparis, 2017) that many of our project members were experiencing in everyday life. As Faith articulated 'every day we are refugees or asylum seekers to someone. Here we are ourselves'.

What emerged from *inviting visibility* was a growing consideration of the responsibility of the project member as viewer or the listener, and their role in creating a space where each was comfortable being seen and heard. By presenting these moments 'as a space to learn' not just about one another, but *from* one another, we embarked upon acts of 'collective listening' that affirmed 'the value and uniqueness of each voice' (hooks, 1994, p.84). In turn, we developed 'a communal awareness of the diversity of our experience' and so the sharings became a way for us to gain a better understanding of one another, as well as to deepen our understanding of how we inter-related with one another. I propose that through this we committed to 'a politics of the intimate' (Thompson, 2011, p.34), choosing to interpret aesthetics and beauty as process-orientated; 'as participants co-creating work, from their own desires, delights or inspiration' (p.159). In turn *Share My Table* resisted 'a communicative model of art' and became as much about developing a resistant politics of engagement that nourished those of us in the room, as it was about delivering a final 'impact, message or precise revelation' (p.125) to an audience.



*I see, I hear, I feel: using handmade pinhole cameras the project members captured abstract images of their everyday lives, then used the photographs as a starting point for new writing.*  
Photo: Elena Mary Harris.

Finally, I want to highlight the importance of the workshop as space where multiple languages were spoken and utilised to share the creativity and ideas being developed. Whilst translation played a key role in enabling people to feel comfortable and able to access the space, the project tried to encourage a multilingual approach to art-making. Though many project members expressed their desire to use the project to improve their English and to communicate their ideas in English, the option of speaking in one's first, second or even fifth language was always encouraged and welcomed whenever anyone felt this was how they wanted or needed to speak. Phipps argues that

when asylum seekers use language, it is from places of extreme experience where language is subject to extraordinary pressure: pressure of legal narrative, pressure of traumatic recollection; pressure of pain and desperation, pressure in another language that is not their mother

tongue; pressure to speak through tears  
(Phipps, 2012, p.587).

Our approach was to alleviate the burden of language from our creative space, allowing us to actively move away from the hegemony of an imposed monolingual culture. With up to ten languages in the space at any one time, this did not always mean that communication was easy. There were moments where we had to work through miscommunication, or where clashes of personalities and cultures required careful interventions. Furthermore, as a monolingualist myself I often felt embarrassed at not being able to remember words and phrases that were taught to me from week to week. Nonetheless, multilingual conversing offered us all the 'experience of hearing non-English words' (hooks, 1994, p.172) and the opportunity to celebrate the richness of a diversity of phrases and sounds. Exactly by offering multilingual artmaking, *Share My Table* opposed 'a multicultural world that remains white supremacist' and that uses formal and bureaucratic English to disorientate and dehumanise as well 'as a weapon to silence and censor' (p.172). Advocating visibility, multilingualism and multiplicity within our space, became an act of resistance against the hostile environment outside.

## **Conclusion: pushing beyond integration**

In this article, I have argued that arts practice can be read as a 'location of possibility'; a space focused on affective engagement 'where we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress' (hooks, 1994, p.207). I cautioned against the possible *limitations of arts practice*, whilst addressing how to create spaces that offer us alternative ways of being; artistic spaces that push against the hegemonic and hostile strategies *that those* navigating the asylum and immigration system face on a daily basis. Finally, I propose that arts practice, with a focus on the aesthetics of process, is a means through which we can challenge normative conceptions of

integration. An aesthetics of process allows movement towards a more complicated and 'messy' understanding of community and society that is rooted in notions of interdependence, rather than integration. Danewid argues that global ethics and solidarity needs to be rethought so that connections are forged from 'the shared intertwined histories that arise out of the colonial past, and the neo-colonial present' rather than through the 'oneness and interconnectedness of humanity' (2017, p.1683). With regard to Danewid and *Share My Table*, I would welcome participatory arts practitioners moving away from the work of solely humanising or provoking empathy, whether it be between participants within a workshop or for audiences at a performance, and instead building artistic spaces where inter-relations and shared moments of creation and responsibility can form the basis for localised solidarity.

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## Notes

1. As part of a process of maintaining ongoing consent from project members to feed into this research I invited everyone to choose their own pseudonym. All project member names used in this article were self-authored. <sup>[1]</sup>

2. I would recommend Sarah Nuttall's introduction, as well as the individual essays in *Beautiful ugly: African and diaspora aesthetics* (2007). This offers an extensive insight into, and resists the Eurocentric definition of aesthetics and beauty defined by colonial, hierarchical 'unexamined whiteness'. <sup>[1]</sup>

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## About the author

Catrin Evans is a theatre-maker, academic and activist. For the last twelve years she has been making work with Scotland's leading theatre companies. Work includes: *I Hear The Image Moving* (Tramway / Scottish Refugee Council), *To Hell and Back* (Oran Mor), *Endurance* (A Moment's Peace), *Dear Scotland* (National Theatre of Scotland), *Leaving Planet Earth* (Grid Iron / Edinburgh International Festival); *Some Other Mother* by AJ Taudevin, *The*

*Sweet Silver Song of the Lark* by Molly Taylor (Oran Mor) and *Thank You* (Oran Mor), *The Chronicles of Irania* (A Moment's Peace).

Catrin is the Artistic Director of A Moment's Peace Theatre Company, whose reputation for delivering innovative participatory arts projects across Scotland marks them out as an integral part of the socially-engaged arts community. Catrin has a history of creating work focused on refugee and asylum issues and is committed to developing the relationship between arts and activism in order to resist structural and cultural inequalities. As well as her work with AMP and as a freelance artist, Catrin is undertaking an AHRC-funded practice-based PhD at the University of Glasgow, in partnership with the Scottish Refugee Council and Glasgow Refugee Asylum and Migration Network.